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ABSTRACT

This study described a sequence of steps that led to the increase of reading and listening comprehension. The targeted population consisted of kindergarten and first grade students in a rural community located in the Midwest. The problems of reading comprehension were documented through data collected by standardized test scores. The gain of knowledge was shown through pre- and post-measures. Analysis of probable cause data indicated students were struggling with comprehension strategies. Teacher observations indicated weaknesses in listening and reading comprehension across all areas of the curriculum. Teachers reported a lack of a balanced approach in overall instruction and a deficit in comprehension strategies. A review of solution strategies suggested by authorities in the field of reading education and the analysis of the targeted classrooms resulted in the following intervention: development of a more balanced approach to reading instruction with special focus on comprehension skills and strategies. Post intervention data indicated an increase in overall reading and listening comprehension proficiency in the targeted kindergarten and first grade classes. A comprehension survey instrument is attached. (Contains 40 references, 9 tables, and 3 figures.) (Author/RS)

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# IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION THROUGH THE USE OF BALANCED LITERACY AND SPECIFIC COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

Laurie Kern
Beth Kiningham
Sheila Vincent

An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the

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This study described a sequence of steps that led to the increase of reading and listening comprehension. The targeted population consisted of kindergarten and first grade students in a rural community located in the Midwest. The problems of reading comprehension were documented through data collected by standardized test scores. The gain of knowledge was shown through pre- and postmeasures.

Analysis of probable cause data indicated students were struggling with comprehension strategies. Teacher observations indicated weaknesses in listening and reading comprehension across all areas of the curriculum. Teachers reported a lack of a balanced approach in overall instruction and a deficit in comprehension strategies.

A review of solution strategies suggested by authorities in the field of reading education and the analysis of the targeted classrooms resulted in the following intervention: development of a more balanced approach to reading instruction with special focus on comprehension skills and strategies.

Post intervention data indicated an increase in overall reading and listening comprehension proficiency in the targeted kindergarten and first grade classes.

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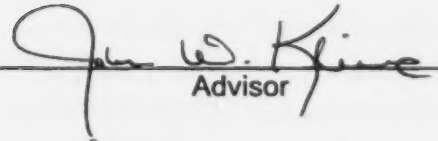

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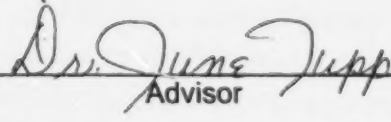

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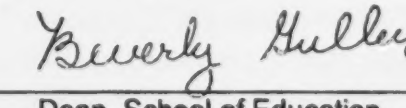

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. CHAPTER 1—PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement....1

Immediate Problem Context....1

School Description....2

District Description....4

Classrooms Descriptions....5

Reading Program....8

Community Description....9

National Context....11

II. CHAPTER 2—PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence....15

Probable Causes....26

III. CHAPTER 3—THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review....31

Project Objectives and Processes....40

Action Plan....41

Methods of Assessment....46

IV. CHAPTER 4—PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention.....48

Presentation and Analysis of Results.....51

Discussions.....57

V. REFERENCES.....60

VI. APPENDIX.....A

# CHAPTER 1

## PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

### General Statement of the Problem

The students of the targeted kindergarten and first grade classes exhibit poor reading comprehension skills as documented by the Metropolitan Readiness Tests, Gates MacGinitie Test, and the Stanford Achievement Test. Kindergarten students lacked the ability to answer inferential and literal questions on material read to them. Continuing into first grade, the students showed lack of progress in comprehension strategies both in listening and independent reading. Informal teacher conversations and teacher observation indicated the children also lack strategies in using context clues and relating prior knowledge to comprehend unfamiliar words both during reading and listening activities.

### Immediate Problem Context

This research study was conducted at the same building in which three classrooms are involved. The classrooms are labeled A, B and C. Classroom A is a kindergarten room, Classroom B and Classroom C are first grade rooms.

## School Description

The school is located in a small, rural, Midwestern community. It is nestled in a quiet, neighborhood setting. This two-story brick building was originally built in 1967, but was extensively remodeled in 1998. It is a primary building that houses grades prekindergarten through second grade.

Upon entering the building, a visitor would immediately hear the seasonal music wafting down from the balcony. The natural light from the two-story atrium enhanced the warm feeling one gets when entering the building. The freshly painted walls of various shades of blue and green created an atmosphere of peacefulness. Children's work was displayed on bulletin boards attached to the walls. Also on display was the school's peace train in which each classroom designed a car to represent their personality. Additionally, there was a large, framed picture of the entire staff and student body.

Each grade level is located in its own corridor. The special education room is located in the first grade hall. Music and art are located on the balcony level. The gymnasium is located next to the cafeteria. Both of these areas were newly constructed in 1998. The school library is nestled in the middle of the building between the first and second grade corridors. The Writing to Read room is located in the first grade hallway. The computer lab is located in the second grade hallway.

The grounds around the building have been landscaped in honor of past staff members. The butterfly garden located along the west wall of the building

was of special interest. The garden faced a large playground filled with unique, colorful, recreational equipment.

Total enrollment of the school was 288 students. The ethnic background was 97% Caucasian, 2% African American, and 1% Asian Pacific Islander. Low-income students accounted for 21.6% of the student population. Attendance rate for the school was 95.7%, which included a 15.2% mobility rate. At the time there were no chronic truants. The average class size for kindergarten was 20.3, and the average classroom size for first grade was 18.2 (School Report Card, 2000). This school housed three sections of prekindergarten, two sections of early childhood, three sections of kindergarten, three sections of first grade, and four sections of second grade.

The school staff consisted of dedicated employees devoted to children's education. Female employees accounted for 93% of the staff, while 7% were male. The staff was 100% Caucasian with an average of 25.2 years of teaching experience. There were 43 employees, of which 28 are certified. Thirteen staff members had their master's degree. There were 11 classroom teachers. The school provided many learning opportunities by the inclusion of music, art, and physical education teachers. Additionally, the school provided a teacher for reading improvement, a resource teacher for children with special needs, a speech teacher, and a school counselor. This school was fortunate in having10 aides who assisted the children in the computer lab, library, classrooms, and reading room. The office staff included a principal, a secretary, and a part-time aide. Staff members who were shared with other buildings in the district included

the school nurse, librarian, social worker, school psychologist, hearing itinerant, and technology director.

## District Description

The district is a consolidation of four small farm communities and one town. The school district includes two elementary buildings, one middle school, and one junior-senior high school. High school graduation rate was 94.1%, as compared to the state average of 82.6%. The district average ACT score of 21.1 was just below the state average of 21.5 (School Report Card, 2000).

Instructional expenditures equal $3,145 per pupil with the state average being $4,291. The average district salary per teacher was $37 937, which was below the state average of $45,766. The average administrator salary was $63,979, which was again below the state average of $79,017. Throughout the district, the pupil-teacher ratio was 17.8 to 1 as compared to the state ratio of 19.3 to 1 (School Report Card, 2000).

Students were encouraged to participate in a variety of extracurricular activities. Sports, fine arts, and many school clubs were available. Also offered was a before and after school daycare, which was continued throughout the summer. Additionally, the district also provided summer school for at-risk students. As an incentive for appropriate behavior, a program has been developed to encourage students to use peaceful resolutions to cope with frustration and anger. These programs enhanced opportunities for each child's success.

## Classroom Descriptions

### Classroom A

Located on the lower level of the building, Classroom A is the first of three kindergarten rooms. A combination of two smaller rooms, this spacious room on the south side of the building has two large windows that provide natural light. The walls are decorated with children's work and lively posters. Calendar activities, children's work, important information, and a word wall containing environmental words were displayed on the four bulletin boards. Located along the south wall are shelves with puzzles and games that the children enjoyed playing. Various centers were spread throughout the room.

A math center was filled with manipulatives and the writing center has plenty of markers, crayons, and pencils. There was a rocking chair, which allowed the teacher to be close to the students while reading a story. The library center had many books and a tape recorder so students could listen to their favorite story. A play area containing building blocks, kitchen toys, dress up, and music encouraged the children to use their imagination. When one looked around the room, the children appeared to be comfortable with their surroundings.

Much of the day was spent on reading and math activities. For enrichment, the students were introduced to various thematic units, which incorporated several areas of the curriculum under one theme. Smiling faces and energetic bodies indicated a happy learning environment.

Classroom B

Classroom B, located in the southern corridor on the second level of the building, is a large, rectangular room with two windows located on each end of the southern wall. It contains a handicapped accessible restroom in the northeast part of the room, a large closet for storage, the classroom door, and a washtub on the northern wall. The room benefits from air conditioning; however, a fan runs at all times creating a constant background noise. The classroom, carpeted and with pale teal concrete block walls, had a large chalkboard on the east wall flanked by a bulletin board and a set of shelves.

An alphabet chart and a number line were displayed above the chalkboard. A colorful word wall was positioned on the southern wall between the two windows. The west wall of the room was made of a tack board material print rich with students' writing, art, and posters. Murals created by the students were often placed on this wall to enhance the various theme units done throughout the year. Two computers were also located against the west wall. The southwest corner of the room had an area rug, two bookcases, and a large fish tank and was used for quiet reading and playtime. The bookcases were situated so the backs of them can be used for word activities using magnets. The calendar was set up in the southeast corner of the room where opening activities, group lessons, and story times were held. The listening center was also located in this corner. The desks for the 24 children were arranged in groups of 3.

Mornings in Classroom B and C were spent on reading and language activities. A combination of centers, small group, and whole group instruction was

used. For the first semester, the class spent one hour per day in the Writing to Read room in which computers and small group instruction were used to reinforce phonics skills. Five students received help from the reading improvement teacher. Afternoons were spent on math and theme units. Manipulatives and the overhead projector were frequently used to model math skills. Theme units revolved around the science, health, and social studies curriculum.

Classroom C

Classroom C, a large, bright room with two double hung windows, is located on the south side of the first grade corridor. The floor was carpeted, the walls were a pale blue-green, and an abundance of primary colors brightened the walls. Valances with a cheerful print hung at the windows. An alphabetical listing of 100 high-frequency words appropriate for first grade reading and writing activities was attached to the upper part of the south wall, and below it sat a long, slender heating and cooling unit that hummed constantly.

The east wall contained the reading center area with three bookcases and a listening center with books and tapes. There were also tubs of books that were sorted by reading level and interest areas. The teacher had included a beanbag chair, throw pillows, and large, stuffed animals on which the children relaxed while reading. Adjacent, separated by a bookcase, was a free choice center with three computers located on one side. It was stocked with learning games for math and reading, math manipulatives, tracing stencils, and games.

The north wall contained the classroom bathroom, sink, storage shelves,

and a storage cabinet. The teacher's desk sat in the northwest corner which leads into the beginning of the west wall chalkboard. A large bulletin board was attached to the wall in the southwest corner, adjacent to the chalkboard and a window. This sunny corner made a natural "gathering area" for the daily calendar, stories, discussions, and chalkboard instruction. Near this area was a round table that the teacher used for small-group instruction.

The middle area of the room contained desks in groups of four and five. Off to one side was also a large, multi-purpose table sometimes used for group work, games, or writing. During the spring and fall months, it was used for a "nature table" to display items of interest the children brought in from the outdoors.

## Reading Program

In kindergarten, reading was taught using The Land of the Letter People (Riess-Weimann & Friedman, 1995). This program taught each new letter and its sound on a weekly basis. Reading readiness skills and literature were incorporated in this program. In the spring, the kindergarten used the Writing to Read 2000 (Martin, 1993) program to enhance phonic skills and writing ability while promoting self-confidence in reading. Skills were reinforced through various thematic units including fish, butterflies, solar system, and other nature units.

In first grade, reading centered on the use of the Heath reading series, copyrighted in 1989. First grade was expected to cover three preprimers, one primer, and one first grade reading book. The philosophy of this reading series was "...to focus on using the strategies and skills of reading within the context of

all the language arts"(Alvermann,Bridge, Schmidt, Searfoss, & Winograd 1989, p. R27). At this time, a new reading series was being considered, but would not be implemented for a year. In addition to the basal, The Lives of the Letter People (Reiss-Weimann & Friedman, 1998) was an additional program to supplement phonics instruction. One hour per day was spent in the Writing to Read room in which children used computer programs to learn the phonemes, listen to quality literature, play word games, or create short stories in small groups. Guided reading was a new program implemented in 2001.

## Community Description

The town in which the school is located is situated on rolling hills overlooking a river valley. It is well known for its lovely Victorian homes and attractive county courthouse. Not only is it a beautiful little town, but it also satisfies most of its citizen's needs. The chamber of commerce is very active. There are numerous service clubs, 12 churches, a library, and a historic county museum, quality health care, along with higher educational opportunities. Businesses in the town include real estate, restaurants, utility companies, insurance companies, legal services, manufacturing, a newspaper/printer, several building contractors, a grocery store, gas stations, three farm and home suppliers, bed and breakfasts, automotive dealers, two banks, and a funeral home. This historic town is filled with antique shops. A state historic site is located two miles south, and many of the residents are employed there or are volunteers. This site also boasts a well-known outdoor theatre for entertainment. The town caters to many tourists who visit the area.

The community provides many services for its residents. A new, comprehensive medical clinic is located in town. Dentist, chiropractic and pharmaceutical services are also available. A number of lawyers have offices in town. A veterinary clinic also serves the animal population.

The area had a growth rate of 11.8%. The median household income was $42,678 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The average price of a home was $94,900 (Capital Area Association of Realtors, 2000). There are five public housing sites located in the school district. Traditional families made up 61% of the total population. Single female, as head of a household, was 13%. The average family size was 2.89. The racial makeup of population was 98% Caucasian, 1.3 % African-American, and 0.9% is some other race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

The majority of children who attend schools in the district live in unincorporated areas. The town, with a population of 2,299, actually serves considerably more than that. A 250 home private development surrounds a 190-acre lake. Numerous subdivisions dot the area around the town. The school district also includes four small villages that are in the county. These are farm communities that depend on either the town the school is located in, or a nearby metropolitan area for their needs.

This town is considered a bedroom community because many people prefer the small town atmosphere with city conveniences just 22 miles away. State government in the nearby capital city, as well as retail businesses, are also an attraction for area employment. Residents travel to the city for entertainment and to shop at the major national retailers. Highlights of this capital city include a

regional medical center, a four-year university, two junior colleges, a medical school and a school of nursing.

The school district's community highly values the education of its children. This was evidenced by the participation of many community members in school activities. The community recently passed a bond referendum, which resulted in one new building and extensive remodeling of two others. The Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) had a growing membership, which supported all grade levels. One hundred percent of the parents having students in the elementary school had contact with school staff during the year 2000 (School Report Card, 2000).

## National Context

According to the 1997 National Academy of Sciences study, Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, &Griffin, 1998), large numbers of children in America do not read well enough to be successful in their future jobs. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP 1994), which is used by state and national officials to monitor learning, reported that only 40% of all fourth graders tested were proficient at reading (Learning First Alliance, 1998). Urban schools had a lower average score than suburban and rural town locations. Students who were eligible for free lunch had a lower average score than those who were ineligible. Although average scores have remained fairly stable since 1992, there is a widening gap between the best and worst readers. Since 1992, scores in the 75$^{th}$ percentile have risen considerably, and those under the tenth percentile have dropped. The demands for literacy are

increasing, but reading skills have remained stagnant for the past 25 years (Learning First Alliance, 1998).

Considerable research has established that a child's comprehension is dependent on his/her available background knowledge (Pearson & Johnson, 1978 as cited by Merkley, 1997). Although background knowledge is the key to reading comprehension success, many children from impoverished families enter school with a deficit of prior knowledge and life experiences (Learning First Alliance, 1998). Research done by the National Institute of Child Health and Development determined that early language and literacy experience is extremely important to the development of reading (1998). Programs developed by the United States Department of Education, such as the Even Start Family Literacy Program, provide a chance for young children to develop their oral language skills and benefit from high quality literary instruction (Snow, et. al, 1998). Early intervention during the early childhood years is very important. Indeed, it has been suggested that children have a particularly difficult time improving their reading abilities after the age of nine.

Research has concluded that comprehension strategies need to be directly taught to children. Studies conducted during the 1980's and 1990's found that there is little reading comprehension instruction in schools. For years education has experienced a pendulum swing between phonics and whole language, neither of which emphasized comprehension strategies. Teachers and schools continue to use a one-approach method (phonics, whole language, or basal instruction), even though one approach does not meet the needs of diverse

learners (Heibert & Pearson, 2000; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Freppon & McIntyre, 1999).

It is apparent that for decades the teaching of reading was a visual or audible process, not a cognitive activity. Children were not taught how to comprehend, but instead were taught fragmented skills such as homonyms, suffixes, and main ideas (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). Researchers suggest that teachers teach thinking strategies instead of isolated skills to better equip students to comprehend and analyze text independently. Teachers need to provide effective comprehension instruction to all students and acquire the appropriate teaching skills through professional development (Duke & Pearson, 2000).

Teachers reported that they received minimal training in the teaching of reading strategies in either their K-12 schooling or their college reading methods classes. Neither reading instruction textbooks nor basal teacher manuals gave adequate assistance in learning to teach children comprehension strategies (Dowhower, 1999). The professional development of experienced teachers is even more strongly implicated than preservice teacher education. Professional development or inservice programs offered by schools do little to change how a teacher teaches. In addition to the lack of teacher preparation, many teachers have not kept up with current research concerning reading comprehension (NICHD, 1998). Teachers have assumed the role of assessing whether or not readers can comprehend instead of instructing readers on how to become proficient at comprehending. Teachers also have been resistant to utilizing new

research findings that suggest ways to improve reading instruction (Lyon, 1999). In summary, it appears that teachers lack the base to teach the comprehension strategies needed to ensure success in reading for all children.

# CHAPTER 2

# PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

## Problem Evidence

The students in the targeted classrooms lacked the skills and strategies needed for successful reading comprehension. Assessments administered to the children documented poor listening and reading comprehension skills. Those inadequate skills were documented by the Metropolitan Readiness Tests and the Stanford Achievement Test. Data were collected from the aforementioned standardized tests, and the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), the Major Points Interview for Readers (MPIR), and the Land of the Letter People listening comprehension subtest. Teachers also reported students demonstrated poor comprehension skills during reading discussions and lessons.

Stanford comprehension scores have slightly declined over the past few years, with the exception of the first grade class in 2001. Class size, which was a maximum of 15 students, could be a possible explanation for the increase in overall reading scores for that year. As noted by Figures 1 and 2, comprehension scores are declining as the children progress through grade three.

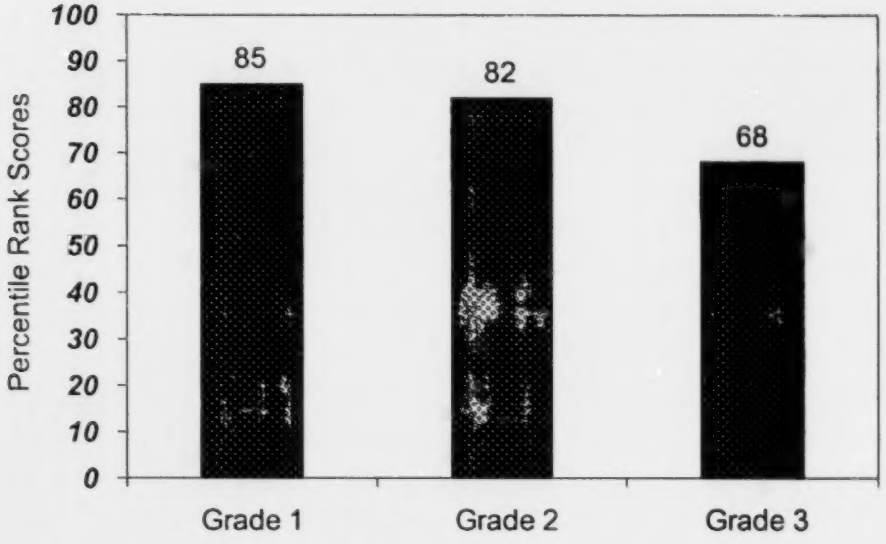


Figure 1. The 2001 percentile rank scores of grades 1 through 3 on the Stanford Achievement Test.

The percentile rank score reflected a consistent decline in reading comprehension scores in the second and third grades. Students in grade 1 had a percentile rank of 85. Grade 2 showed a lower percentile of 82 and grade 3 showed a dramatic decline down to a 68 percentile rank. The drop in comprehension scores indicated students did not transfer the use of comprehension strategies. As text became more complicated, more students lacked the ability to comprehend effectively. As the students progressed through the grade levels, it appeared children needed to be more proficient in applying comprehension strategies.

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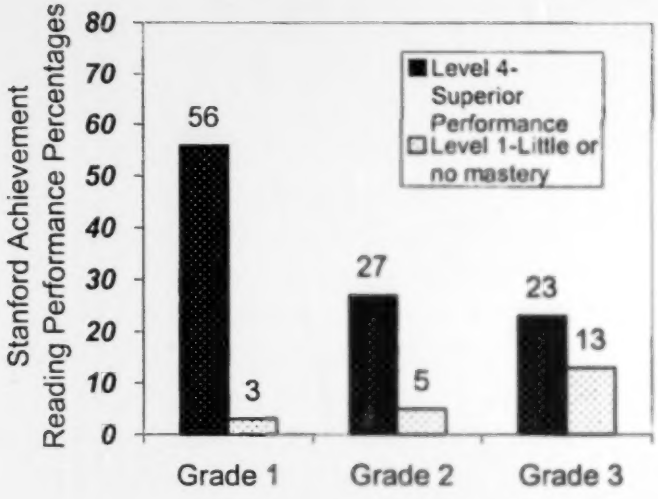


Figure 2. The percentage of children in grades 1 through 3 who scored in the 4th and 1st level of student performance on the 2001 Stanford Achievement Test.

Level 4 signifies superior performance beyond grade level mastery, while level 1 indicates little or no mastery of fundamental knowledge and skills. The performance standards, as shown in Figure 2, reflected a significant drop in the percentage of students performing at Level 4, and an increase in students performing in Level 1. The students in grade 1 scored 56% at Level 4, the highest level. Grade 2 showed a significant drop to 27% at Level 4 and Grade 3 dropped further to 23% at Level 4. Conversely, the number of students increased that scored at Level 1, the lowest level. Grade 1 had 3 % in Level 1. Grade 2 showed a slight increase to 5 % in Level 1 scores, while Grade 3 showed an even more dramatic increase to 13% of students scoring at Level 1.

Listening comprehension is a major indicator of reading comprehension success in first grade. The Metropolitan Readiness Test in kindergarten indicated a significant decrease in listening comprehension skills from the first test



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administered in fall of 2000 to the second test the next spring of 2001. The test scores dropped 12 points from 67th to 55th percentile rank and went from the 6th stanine to the 5th stanine. Testing was administered on an individual basis in the fall and as a group setting in the spring. There were concerns that listening comprehension strategies were not being sufficiently taught at the kindergarten level. It is also a possibility that the decline in scores was related to different testing situations.

The majority of teachers who participated in an informal survey (Appendix A) reported children exhibited poor comprehension skills. Teachers observed children had difficulty relating literature to their prior knowledge (schema), and did not use higher order thinking skills when discussing material they read. . In content area subjects, such as science, students' entries in learning logs indicated children had not comprehended the material they read. The district staff was concerned with declining test score results. Additionally, the staff expressed concerns that children read words well, but do not comprehend text well

A variety of premeasures were administered to the targeted children. Pretest measures included the Land of the Letter People Comprehension Test in kindergarten and the DRA and MPIR in first grade. The Land of the Letter People test and the DRA were administered during the first two weeks of the intervention. The MPIR was administered during the fourth week of the intervention.

The Land of the Letter People Comprehension Test consisted of the teacher reading a story to each child individually about a hamster in a

kindergarten classroom. The children were then required to retell the story in their own words. If they were unable to remember details, prompts were given to encourage a response.

A rubric was used to rate the child's overall performance. A score of four, considered excellent, was received when all major points were covered without prompting. A score of three indicated most major points were covered with little or no prompting. A score of two, considered adequate, required the use of direct questioning by the test administrator to elicit major points. A score of one, when the child was unable to respond successfully to direct questioning, indicated poor comprehension skills. Table 1 reflects the premeasure results for the targeted kindergarten class.

Table 1

Oral Retelling Comprehension Rubric for Land of the Letter People Comprehension Test administered September 15, 2001

| Rating | Number of Students | % of Students |
|---|---|---|
| 4 Excellent (no prompting) | 0 | 0 |
| 3 Good (little prompting) | 1 | 5 |
| 2 Adequate (prompting by questions) | 16 | 80 |
| 1 Poor (prompting ineffective) | 3 | 15 |

Table 1 shows the number of students who could retell the story without prompts, with prompts, and those who could not retell the story at all. The purpose of the test was to identify which students had developed listening comprehension skills. As the table shows, most students had only an adequate

understanding of stories read to them. Out of the 20 students that were administered the test, only 1 child was rated Good on the rubric. This shows that most students lacked the skills to be proficient listeners. Since overall reading readiness correlates with listening comprehension skills, listening skills are an important part of being a successful reader.

The Developmental Reading Assessment was given to all first graders during the fourth week of school. The DRA documents the reading level of each first grader at the beginning of the year. Table 2 reports the students' DRA levels at the beginning of this intervention.

Table 2

DRA Levels of First Grade Students in September, 2001

| Stage | Level | % of Students |
|---|---|---|
| Emergent | A-2 (Kindergarten level) | 42 |
| Early | 3-6 ($1^{st}$ quarter $1^{st}$ grade) | 44 |
| Early | 8-10 ($2^{nd}$ quarter $1^{st}$ grade) | 0 |
| Transitional | 12-14 ($3^{rd}$ quarter $1^{st}$ grade) | 7 |
| Transitional | 16-18 ($4^{th}$ quarter $1^{st}$ grade) | 0 |
| Transitional | 20-24 (early to mid $2^{nd}$ grade) | 5 |
| Extending | 28 (late $2^{nd}$ early $3^{rd}$ ) | 2 |

Table 2 shows the majority of first graders entered the year as emergent or early readers. The targeted first grade classrooms included 41 children. The DRA tests were conducted on an individual basis to record and analyze observable reading behaviors. The DRA test does not include a retelling subtest

on the emergent and early reading levels of the test; however, retelling the story is included after Level 4. Running records of the students' oral reading were kept and the children's ability to retell the story was documented.

Readers at the emergent level are beginning to understand the basic concepts of print. They realize that print has meaning, and pictures help them decode text. Readers at this stage rely on supportive illustrations and background knowledge. Next, early readers can handle longer text with fewer illustrative supports. Those children who are in the transitional stage are beginning to read to learn. Illustrations provide moderate support and readers at this stage are able to comprehend abstract ideas. An extending reader can understand and maintain meaning of more challenging text. The DRA test was administered in September 2001 to place students in guided reading groups, and later to measure reading growth during the school year.

The Major Point Interview for Readers (MPIR) was given to 41 of the targeted first graders during the fourth week of the intervention. Keene and Zimmerman (1997) developed the following questions to be used with the MPIR when assessing the use of schema strategy. Schema is background knowledge and the schema strategy is connecting background knowledge to text being read, thereby increasing comprehension. Each child was assessed individually and responses were recorded after the following questions were asked:

1. When you listened that story, did it remind you of anything you know about? Did it remind you of any experiences or things that have happened in your life?

2. Are there things you know about or things in your life that help you understand this book? How does that help?

3. We have just talked about what this book reminds you of.

What do you understand now that you didn't understand before?

Table 3 shows the criterion used by the test administrator when scoring the schema subtest of the MPIR. After each of the three questions was posed, the child was given a score based on his/her response.

Table 3

Rubric for Major Points Interview for Schema

| Score | Criteria . |
|---|---|
| 1 | No response or schema connection |
| 2 | Discusses what text reminds him/her of, but does not explain how. |
| 3 | Relates to story using background knowledge or experiences. |
| 4 | Uses schema to expand interpretation of text. May relate story to other stories written by the same author. May notice discrepancies between prior knowledge and text. |
| 5 | Explains how schema helps interpret the story. Expands interpretation beyond life experiences using schema. |

Table 3 shows the scoring values with One being the lowest and Five being the highest. A score of One indicated a child had no schema connection to text. Scores of Two and Three showed varying degrees of schema connection. A score of Four or Five represented a developed use of schema strategy.

The first reading comprehension strategy assessed using the MPIR was schema. The schema subtest assessed the child's ability to connect text to background knowledge or experiences. Table 4 shows the initial results from the premeasure given during the fourth week of the intervention.

Table 4

MPIR Scores for Schema Strategy (Connecting Background Knowledge)

| | Percentages of Student Response Scores at each of 5 Levels | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Assessment Questions | no response | background connections | relates schema to text | expands interpretation | explains schema use |
| 1 (memories elicited) | 24 | 34 | 37 | 5 | 0 |
| 2 (personal applications) | 56 | 29 | 15 | 0 | 0 |
| 3 (new understandings) | 63 | 28 | 7 | 2 | 0 |

Table 4 indicated that no one could explain how schema helped them interpret the story. Most of the children's responses fell within the first two categories, which suggested they were using little or no schema connections. The results of Question One indicated 24 percent were unable to describe any experiences from their lives that related to the story. Thirty-four percent of the children verbalized what the text reminded them of, but could not explain why. Only 42 percent of the children applied background knowledge to interpret the text. Fifty-six percent of the children had no schematic connection to Question 2 (personal application). Only 15 percent of the students could apply their schema to understand the story. Question Three indicated few of the children felt using their schema increased knowledge about the topic of the story.

Ellin Keene (1997) developed three questions to be used on the MPIR to assess questioning strategies. Each child was tested individually and their scores were recorded. The questions were:

1. What did you wonder about while you listening to this story?
2. What questions do you have about this book now?
3. We have just discussed or talked about the questions you asked. [Restate child's response.] What do you understand now that you didn't understand before? (p. 229)

Table 5 shows the criteria used by the test administrator in scoring the questioning subtest of the MPIR. Scores were based on responses to each question.

Table 5

MPIR Rubric for Use of Question Strategy to Enhance Interpretation of Text

| Score | Criteria |
|---|---|
| 1 | No questions asked or irrelevant questions |
| 2 | Asks literal questions |
| 3 | Asks questions to clarify meaning |
| 4 | Asks questions to enhance meaning |
| 5 | Uses questions to challenge validity of the text |

Table 5 shows the value of each response with One being the lowest and Five being the highest. A score of One indicated a child was unable to ask relevant questions concerning the text. Scores of Two and Three indicated children asked literal questions or questions to clarify meaning. Scores of Four

and Five documented children could enhance meaning of the text or challenge validity of text by asking questions.

The second reading comprehension strategy assessed was the use of questioning. The questioning subtest assessed the child's ability to use questions to enhance interpretation of the text. Table 6 reflects the premeasure results of the second subtest.

Table 6

MPIR Scores for Questioning Strategy

| | Percentages of Student Response Scores at each of 5 Levels | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Assessment Questions | no questions | poses literal questions | questions clarify meaning | questions enhance meaning | questions challenge meaning |
| 1 (questions during listening) | 53 | 35 | 12 | 0 | 0 |
| 2 (questions after listening) | 93 | 2 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| 3 (new understandings) | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Table 6 shows that no children scored a 4 or 5 which indicated that they could not use questions to enhance meaning or challenge validity of the text. Question One showed more than half of the children did not initially question anything about the selection read to them. Thirty-five percent of the children posed literal questions regarding the story, while only 12 percent posed questions to clarify meaning. After listening to the story, 93 percent of the children had no questions, only 2 percent posed literal questions, and just 5 percent posed questions to clarify meaning. None of the children used questioning strategies to gain new knowledge or understanding.

## Probable Causes

"We are producing a nation of 'word callers' who don't know how to extract meaning from text or who give up easily in the face of demanding text" (Joyce & Weil, 2000, p. 139).

Teachers have not been trained to teach specific comprehension strategies and are not guiding readers to control their own comprehension. Children have been taught reading comprehension strategies as a set of subskills, such as sequencing, predicting outcomes, and finding the main idea. It was assumed the reader was comprehending. By looking for children who do not appear to be comprehending and then addressing those problems, teachers have become "...comprehension repairmen..." (Primeaux, 2000).

The materials that most teachers use in the United States are offered in the basal reading series that their school district has adopted. The targeted school district has used the same basal series for the past 12 years. Most basals emphasize decoding, rote drill, and isolated, meaningless skill practice. Weaknesses of many basals are well documented by reading research (Learning First Alliance, 1998). Teachers who are not well versed in current research and training are not shifting from teaching traditional strategies to cognitive strategy instruction (Knuth & Jones, 1991). Many teachers ask students questions about what they have read or ask them to make predictions to determine if they have comprehended. Neither type of questioning teaches them how to comprehend (Joyce & Weil, 2000). Teachers who are immersed in the whole language philosophy feel that explicit comprehension instruction is too concrete, even

though research has advocated the teaching and modeling of specific comprehension strategies (Duke & Pearson, 2000).

Teachers find comprehension instruction to be challenging. Instruction of comprehension strategies was emphasized in the 1980's until the teaching of the skills interpretation and response was learned. Pendulum swings in reading instruction have occurred for decades. The most recent swing has been from phonics to whole language and back to phonics again. Education tends to replace established practices with new ideas. New knowledge of what should be taught should not automatically replace preexisting knowledge, but should be added to it (Raphael, 2000).

Teacher observations and discussions at the targeted site indicate that, due to overcrowded curriculum, students have not had enough time for daily self-selected reading to improve their fluency and word recognition skills. Fluency, which is reading with accuracy, speed, and proper expression, is one of the most over-looked and neglected of all reading skills (Johnson,1995). A lack of fluency development diminishes comprehension. Non-fluent reading is word-by-word, slow and halting, and with inappropriate expression. Sports coaches and music teachers recognize the need for repeated practice, yet students in reading are often rushed through material without being given the chance to master it (Samuels, 1979 in Johnson, 1995). "If text is read in a laborious and inefficient manner, then it is difficult for the child to remember what has been read and relate it to his or her background" (National Reading Panel, 1998, p.7).

Lack of time devoted each day to silent reading is a cause for reduced comprehension. Many teachers work under the constraints of a standard curriculum, skills that must be checked off, books that must be covered, and time-consuming testing (Allington & Cunningham, 1998). In an over-crowded curriculum setting, daily silent reading is often overlooked or omitted. Thus, the child is denied the chance to practice and improve his or her reading. Independent reading helps students gain not only in fluency, but vocabulary knowledge and word recognition skills as well. The ability to obtain meaning from print depends strongly on the development of word recognition accuracy, decoding unfamiliar words, and fluency. It would be impossible to directly teach all the words children must read. Word recognition must become something children can do on their own (Juel & Minden-Cupp, 1999).

Children from deprived homes or from homes that do not have a high regard for literacy often have a vocabulary deficit, both oral and print. As more and more children enter group-care settings, language and literacy development can be impoverished (Snow, et. al, 1998). The importance of vocabulary knowledge has long been recognized in the development of reading skills. Research shows there are " ...children in America whose educational careers are imperiled because they do not read well enough to ensure understanding and to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive economy" (National Reading Panel, 1998, p.1).

Motivation is important for all children to have in order to be successful in reading. The National Reading Panel (1998) reported that although most

children are motivated to read as primary students, they lose this motivation by adolescence. Children who never become fluent readers lack motivation to read, thus they do not read enough to improve. These children do not develop comprehension strategies or coping skills when confronted with difficult text. Reading comprehension cannot take place if students cannot master word recognition.

Many teachers are not prepared to teach reading with the proper techniques that are needed by their students. Therefore, professional development is a major problem in teaching reading. A projected shortage of new teachers entering this profession, coupled with few credit hours in literacy instruction, will result in many teachers inadequately prepared to teach reading comprehension (Raphael, 2000).

Causes for poor reading comprehension at the targeted site include lack of teacher training in comprehension strategies, children's lack of life experiences to enhance schema, and lack of ongoing instruction to learn and apply comprehension strategies. Overcrowded curriculum at the targeted site left little time for self-selected reading and application of strategies. These causes are supported by national research literature.

National research indicated teachers assumed children were comprehending. Teachers have tended to be reactive to comprehension problems instead of proactive by first teaching comprehension strategies (Primeaux, 2000). According to the Department of Education, teachers need to be more knowledgeable about the new research findings in the area of teaching

reading. The pendulum has swung back and forth between the philosophies of whole language and phonics, leaving students with unbalanced instruction. Teachers need support from administration, parents, specialists, and fellow colleagues. "It is imperative that all teachers at all grade levels understand the course of literacy development and the role of instruction in optimizing literacy development" (Snow, et. al, 1998, p.6).

# CHAPTER 3

# THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

## Literature Review

Reading comprehension strategies are the key to the success rate of young children in reading. Through the use of specific comprehension strategies, activating prior knowledge, questioning, predicting, and fluency development, students will be able to comprehend better in all content areas. When readers relate ideas from a read story to prior knowledge and experiences, students will be better able to comprehend the material.

There is a significant amount of research on the teaching of effective comprehension strategies. Guiding readers to learn comprehension strategies should be the goal of all reading teachers. Research has shown that the teaching of comprehension strategies can help improve the reading comprehension skills of all children (Duke & Pearson, 2000). Direct instruction of reading comprehension results in children becoming more proficient in using particular strategies taught as well as learning more information and ideas from what they read (Shanahan & Teale, 2000).

After reviewing more than 200 studies about reading comprehension, the National Reading Panel (1998) concluded many children do not know how to comprehend. There is a need to have comprehension strategies directly taught. Children need to learn how to monitor their own comprehension, answer and ask questions, and summarize what they have read. The use of cooperative learning, making visual displays such as graphic and semantic organizers, and story maps also help with the development of comprehension skills. Finally, the opportunity to practice applying new strategies is essential, especially in subjects other than reading. Children need to practice comprehension skills by reading independently, in pairs, and by being read to (Snow, et. al, 1998).

Research has suggested that teachers focus instructional time on the teaching of specific comprehension strategies. Teachers should give explicit instruction and model how each strategy is to be used, and explain why it is used, and the appropriate time when it is used. At first, children will use the strategies under teacher supervision, receiving help in deciding what strategy to use or how to use it. However, as students become more proficient, the responsibility of strategy use is gradually given over to them. Researchers and educators sometimes refer to this strategy as scaffolding. The goal of teaching reading comprehension strategies is for children to use them independently throughout the day in all subject areas. Direct instruction of reading comprehension results in children becoming more proficient in using specific strategies taught as well as learning more information and gaining new ideas

from what they have read (Duke & Pearson, 2000; Shanahan & Teale, 2000; Primeaux, 2000).

One of the most significant areas of reading research has been in schema theory. Information retrieved from a person's long-term memory bank is schema (Blachowicz & Ogle, 2001; Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). Schema theory attempts to explain the process of constructing understanding of an experience by using information retrieved from a person's long-term memory bank. One of the most effective ways to improve comprehension is to activate a child's background knowledge (schema). Children are better able to understand a story if they think about their own experiences while reading or listening to a story. The idea of activating prior knowledge facilitates the learning or understanding of new concepts or the building of a bridge between the known and the new (Duke & Pearson, 2000). A child's background knowledge is a key predictor of reading comprehension success.

In the book, Mosiac of Thought, Keene and Zimmermann (1997) emphasized the importance of helping children to recall information from past experiences and building new schema to develop strong comprehension skills. Children need knowledge and understanding of their own world in order to make sense of what they have read. To teach this strategy, teachers demonstrated, through thinking aloud, how they are activated their own background knowledge when reading stories orally to the class. Thus, instructors modeled how to activate schema. Keene and Zimmermann described three forms in which unfamiliar text can be related to prior knowledge. These forms were text-to-self,

text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. Text-to-self connections occur when a reader can relate a personal experience to the story. Text-to-text occurs when the reader is reminded of books or stories they have already read or heard. Text-to-world connections relate the text to a broader problem which concerns other people.

Considerable time was spent modeling, practicing, and independently using each strategy before students progressed to the next strategy. After children were comfortable using the three forms of text connections, the teacher introduced the strategy of using what is known about an author's writing style to other books written by that same author. Finally, when the children had inadequate background information to understand text, teachers helped the students to expand schema by building on existing schema. By teaching children to use schema, the use of prior knowledge and experience helps students to develop new schema when listening to text or while reading independently (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997).

Prediction is a cognitive strategy where children activate prior knowledge to hypothesize what they think will happen in a story. Prediction strategy gives purpose for reading text and encourages readers to connect what they already know to new information they may encounter while reading (King & Johnson, 1999). Children are asked to make predictions based on life experiences, what they may do in similar situations, then continue reading to see if predictions are correct. This technique has led to increased comprehension as compared to reading the same stories without making predictions (Fielding, Wilkinson, Mason,

and Shirey, 1987 as cited by Duke & Pearson, 2000). Again, it is important that the teacher model the strategy when reading aloud so children become familiar with prediction making based on prior knowledge (King & Johnson, 1999; Duke & Pearson, 2000).

Questions enable children to explore their worlds. Small children offer an endless stream of questions to help make sense of their world. Proficient readers ask questions before, during and after they read. The comprehension strategy, asking questions, teaches children to be aware of questions they have while reading text. Questions help clarify meaning and help keep students focused on reading. As children become more proficient at asking reading questions, they discover some answers are inferred based on background knowledge. Most children are unaware of questions they have while reading and need explicit instruction asking questions before, during, and after reading to help them better understand the text. This approach can be accomplished by teacher modeling during story time, by encouraging students to keep track of the questions they have while reading then conferencing with the teacher or by working cooperatively with classmates (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). Questioning by the teacher helps readers discover main ideas. The teacher identifies important information in a passage and forms a question. Questions help children remember content, and through modeling and practice, they can learn how to develop good questions on their own (Maras, 1995; King & Johnson, 1999). Questioning also facilitates the development of clear, precise and logical thinking

skills. Through discussions, children learn to support their views, to listen, and to critique others' views. They learn to become critical thinkers.

Skills in word recognition help students to comprehend connected text, and should be emphasized (Snow, et. al, 1998). Children need to know the meanings of and recognition of well over 80,000 words by the end of third grade (Adams, Carroll, Davies, & Richman, as cited in Juel & Minden-Cupp, 1999). First graders need a significantly large bank of sight words to become fluent readers. Many words cannot be decoded and thus need to be memorized (Chicago Public School K-2 Handbook, 2001).

A technique to help children learn sight words is through a "word wall." A word wall is an alphabetized listing of 100 high frequency words that children are expected to know how to read and spell by the end of the school year. The use of a word wall helps children master abstract high-frequency connecting words [i.e. as, is, the, and] used naturally in speech patterns, but difficult to learn to read (Allington & Cunningham, 1998). Five new sight words are introduced and focused on each week. The new words are practiced and memorized through daily activities and word games.

Word recognition must become something that children can eventually do on their own. Direct phonics instruction is a way children can be taught to decode unknown words. Another way is through reading which helps children gain world knowledge and word recognition skill (Juel & Minden-Cupp, 1999). Children must go beyond word reading for comprehension to take place. Just "...getting each word right..." does not promote comprehension. Reading fluently is important.

Allington, 1998, stated "Children who are trained to concentrate their energies on word pronunciation exhibit word-by-word reading, a low self-correction rate, and a general lack of fluency. Their reading just doesn't sound good [sic]" (p. 48).

The National Reading Panel (NRP), described fluent readers as being able to read orally with speed, accuracy, and proper expression. Fluency is a major component for effective comprehension(1998). Fountas and Pinnell (1996) also stated that fluency, phrasing, and rate of reading are related to effective comprehension. When students read slowly with pauses to decode words, comprehension drops. Non-fluent readers typically find reading difficult, laborious and an activity to avoid. On the other hand, students who read fluently do better on all comprehension assessments. Also, students who are fluent readers have more positive attitudes toward reading and are more likely to read with pleasure (NAEP, 1993, as cited in Fountas and Pinnell, 1996).

The importance of developing fluency as an important comprehension strategy was also recognized in the Reading Instruction Competence Assessment for beginning teachers, California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2001; Snow, et. al, 1998; and Adams, 1990, as cited in Pearson's (in progress) "Summary of Early Reading Recommendations in National Research Synthesis".

Effective teachers set aside time for independent reading every day. Research confirmed a high correlation exists between independent reading and reading improvement. One of the most significant ways children can become fluent, competent readers is through independent reading (Center for the Study

of Reading, 1990, as cited in Jonson, 1998). Research also confirmed that experience with children's literature helps in the development of vocabulary and growth in background knowledge, which enhances comprehension (Jonson, 1998; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998; Learning First Alliance, 1998).

Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon (1996) described the self-selected reading block in their book, The Teacher's Guide to the Four-Blocks, "The purpose of this block [of time] is to build fluency in reading, to allow students to read and enjoy text that is appropriate to their own independent reading levels, and to build confidence as readers" (page 36). The California Department of Education (1995, 1996, 1997, as cited in Jonson, 1998), stated that good reading instruction includes daily reading by and to children. Independent reading is an essential part of balanced literacy instruction in the early grades.

The NRP (1998) recommended students participate in the technique of repeated oral practice with explicit guidance and feedback from the teacher to develop fluency. Johnson, 1999, refers to this strategy as "supported reading." Specific techniques for developing fluency include a combination of read-alouds such as choral reading, oral reading of poetry and short texts (Opitz & Rasinski, 1998; Sarroub & Pearson, 1999). Oral modeling is another element of fluency instruction and can be achieved through teacher read-alouds and audio taped books (Allington, 1983 as cited in Johnson, 1995). During classroom story time, teachers can model fluency and call students' attention to it. Fluency can also be taught and practiced during small-group, guided reading lessons.

In Fountas and Pinnell (1996) guided reading, another component of effective literacy instruction, serves an important goal to help children learn how to use independent reading strategies successfully. The teacher works with a small, homogenous group of children who are near a similar reading level and share similar reading processes. Guided reading involves ongoing teacher observation and assessment that informs the teacher of appropriate text selection for each group. The text must be easy enough for the child to read with 90% accuracy and challenging enough to enable children to use and develop independent reading strategies. The teacher meets the children where they are in reading and then guides them to the next successful step. "The idea is for children to take on novel texts, read them at once with a minimum of support, and read them again and again for independence and fluency "(Fountas and Pinnell, 1996, p. 2).

Maintaining a literacy rich classroom is essential. A 1999 research study, (Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley) investigated exemplary first grade literacy instruction. The targeted classrooms had a literacy-rich environment in common. All rooms had an abundance of reading materials on the walls at a height accessible to students. Resources included charts with functional information: including weather charts, helper charts, rules for the class, calendar, and poetry posters. Many displays of student work and writing were on walls and bulletin boards (Morrow, et. al, 1999). Rooms were also filled with learning centers promoting literacy. All centers had reading and writing materials. A guided reading center for small-group instruction was in each classroom. The shared

reading area contained a special chair for the teacher which was also used as an "author chair" for students' use when sharing writing or special experiences (Morrow, et. al. 1999). Reading materials were abundant. Four types of reading took place in each classroom: shared read-alouds, partner reading, guided reading groups, and independent reading. Children also wrote regularly throughout the day in many forms. Open-faced bookshelves contained books related to current themes or topics the class was learning. Cross-curricular themes were used to make connections to all subjects and skills currently being taught. Themes were quite evident through displays of students' written work, artwork, and charts and posters (Morrow, et. al, 1999).

Interestingly, all the teachers of the classrooms in this study had master's degrees and 9-25 years of teaching experience. This data reinforces research that the teacher, along with high quality professional training and development, is a key component of effective, balanced literacy instruction (Morrow, et. al., 1999; Pressley, et. al, 1998; Snow, et. al, 1998; Learning First Alliance, 1998).

In conclusion, the key solutions to improving reading in early elementary children are balanced literacy instruction, explicit teaching of specific comprehension strategies, and teachers with high quality professional training.

## Project Objectives and Processes

As a result of a balanced approach to reading instruction and the teaching of comprehension strategies during the period of September 2001 to January 2002, the kindergarten and first grade students of the targeted classes will increase their reading comprehension levels as measured by the

Developmental Reading Assessment, the Major Points Interview, the Gates-MacGinite Test of Reading Comprehension, and the Land of the Letter People Comprehension Subtest. In order to accomplish this goal, the following processes are necessary:

1. Use explicit instruction of comprehension strategies including the use of schema and questioning before, during, and after reading, or listening to a story.
2. Implement guided reading into the curriculum.
3. Incorporate word analysis skills with comprehension strategies.
4. Maintain a print-rich environment in the classroom.
5. Provide additional time for self-selected reading.
6. Read quality literature to children on a daily basis.

## Action Plan

The following action plan is designed to increase the comprehension skills of the targeted kindergarten and first grade students. The implementation of the action plan is 18 weeks. The students will be assigned numbers to protect confidentiality. There are no foreseeable risks to the students.

Week 1 Teachers will administer premeasures to students

Send home parent notes

Begin teacher journals and weekly conferences with the teachers of the targeted classrooms to compare weekly progress and discuss problem areas.

Targeted Strategies: Phonemic awareness activities

Oral vocabulary and prior knowledge

1. Read stories and observe reactions and listening skills
2. Incorporate self-selected reading time of 15 minutes for first grade and 5 minutes for kindergarten
3. Enhance oral vocabulary by learning action rhymes, nursery rhymes, songs, chants, and echo chants.

Week 2

Targeted Strategies: Word recognition skills

Continue oral vocabulary and prior knowledge

1. Teachers model word recognition by use of environmental print and names
2. Begin word wall activities (first grade) to develop word recognition skills
3. Begin Land of the Letter People kindergarten reading program by introducing one letter and its sound weekly
4. Kindergarten class will be introduced to the Name Game (word chants for students' names)
5. Begin Heath reading series in first grade
6. Begin thematic units
    a. Kindergarten- All About Me!
    b. First grade- Insects

Weeks 3 - 7 Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) test during Weeks 3 through 5 (first grade)

Targeted Strategies: Using prediction as a strategy

Using schema

Continue targeted strategies from Weeks 1 and 2

1. Introduce and model the strategy of predicting outcomes when reading a story to the students
2. Use predictable charts and books to develop oral language and word recognition
3. Begin making words using onsets and rimes.
4. Increase self-selected reading time to 20 minutes per session, increase to 10 minutes for kindergarten
5. Introduce and model the strategy of using schema
6. Model with students how to use their relevant, prior knowledge (schema) to understand a story they are hearing for the first time
7. Use strategies of schema, with teacher direction, while reading across the curriculum
8. Continue reading and discussing numerous books to children
9. Begin guided reading, using DRA results
10. Continue with additional thematic units, incorporating schema strategies

Week 8 Metropolitan test given to all kindergarteners

Targeted Strategies: Fluency

Continue targeted strategies from Weeks 1-7

1. Start tracking fluency progress (bi-weekly) using fluency rubric
2. Act out rhymes, stories, and plays
3. Share predictable Big Books (oversized copies of children's literature used in shared reading); choral reading, echo reading. buddy reading
4. Emphasize sentence building using predictable chart and pocket charts
5. Continue word wall activities to develop fluency with environmental and high-frequency words
6. Begin fall thematic units in kindergarten and first grade

Weeks 9-11

Targeted Strategies: Using schema independently (first grade)

Continue targeted strategies from Weeks 1-8

1. Continue practicing modeled strategies previously introduced
2. Monitor students' progress using schema independently during self-selected reading time with individual conferences
3. Monitor students' oral language in kindergarten by using word attack skills (putting letters together to form words)

Weeks 12-15

Targeted Strategies: Use of questioning

Continue targeted strategies from Weeks 1-11

1. Model questioning using picture books, recording questions asked before, during, and after reading
2. Invite students to ask their own questions after reading a story to them
3. Introduce using a K W L chart
4. Incorporate graphic organizers, story maps, and beach balls (tool for asking questions)
5. Involve students be involved in reader's theatre
6. Use small group discussions to model "why" and "how" questions
7. Play "guess the missing word" activities
8. Continue with Big Book activities-pick a page in the middle and discuss what the students know about that page

Weeks 16 –17

Targeted Strategies: Using questioning strategies independently
Continue using strategies from Weeks 1-15

1. During reading conferences, ask students to identify before, during, and after questions regarding independent reading passages
2. Teacher will model connections between questioning and other strategies that the students have been taught

3. Have students use highlighting markers, self-adhesive notes, story maps, question maps to develop and record their own questions during independent reading
4. Continue to have individual conferences with students to monitor progress

Week 18 Teachers administration of postmeasures to students

Methods of Assessment

Portfolios of student work will be kept throughout the intervention as well as anecdotal observations taken throughout the 18 weeks. The following methods of assessment will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

In September, the Major Points Interview for Readers (MPIR) will be given as a premeasure to first grade students. The Land of the Letter People Comprehension Assessment will be given as a premeasure to kindergarten students. The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) will be given in mid to late September to students in first grade. This test will be used as a baseline for guided reading placement. The DRA comprehension rubric will be used as needed as the children progress through levels in guided reading. Fluency progress will be tracked bi-weekly using a fluency rubric.

In late October, the Metropolitan Readiness Test will be administered to the kindergarten students. This assessment is a standardized test that includes reading readiness and comprehension skills. Finally, in early January, first grade students will complete the Gates-MacGinite Test of Reading Comprehension and

the MPIR. A second DRA test will be administered to first grade students. Kindergarten students will be asked to complete the second part of The Land of the Letter People Comprehension Assessment.

# CHAPTER 4

# PROJECT RESULTS

## Historical Description of the Intervention

The objective of the project was to introduce the use of reading comprehension strategies to improve reading comprehension scores. Specific comprehension strategies included activating prior knowledge, questioning, predicting, and fluency development. Special emphasis was placed on activating prior knowledge and questioning strategies.

The Land of the Letter People Comprehension Test was administered to the kindergarten class as a pretest in September, 2001 in order to establish a base-line score of the children's ability to use listening skills. The Metropolitan Readiness Test, which also measures listening comprehension skills, was also administered in October to all kindergarteners.

To build and enhance their prior knowledge, the children were introduced to thematic units. The action plan continued with introducing the children to a variety of literature, action rhymes, chants, songs, nursery rhymes and word building activities. The teacher modeled and taught the use of questioning while reading literature to encourage children to think while listening. Multi-step oral

directions were given to the children frequently to enhance listening and questioning skills.

Pretest measures for the targeted first grade classrooms included The Developmental Reading Assessment and The Major Points Interview for Readers. Both were administered in September, 2001.

The targeted first grade classrooms began the intervention with the development of oral language by using songs, chants, rhymes, echo chants, and poems. These activities also helped develop phonemic awareness. Selected stories were also used to encourage the use of phonemic awareness and the enhancement of prior knowledge. Quality literature was read to the children on a daily basis, and word analysis skills were incorporated with comprehension strategies.

The first comprehension strategy taught was schema, use of prior knowledge. The schema comprehension strategy was directly modeled and taught to the children by using the KWL graphic organizer and teacher-guided discussions. Teachers demonstrated, through thinking aloud technique, how background knowledge is activated when reading stories to the class. Children were taught how to distinguish between three forms of schema: text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections. Children were taught to use prior knowledge and experience to help understand text read to them or while reading independently.

Along with schema strategy, the prediction strategy was modeled and practiced before, during, and after each story read to the children during the

intervention. Prediction was used before a story was read to activate prior knowledge and hypothesize what the story might be about or would happen next.

After obtaining the DRA results in October, guided reading was implemented into the curriculum. Guided reading involved a small group of children (no more than six) who were near similar reading levels and shared similar reading abilities. Teachers chose text the children could read with 90% accuracy, yet was challenging enough to use and develop independent reading strategies. Guided reading was used in addition to whole group instruction using a basal series.

The third strategy taught was the use of questioning. The teacher modeled questions that helped clarify the meaning of the story. Children were explicitly shown the thought processes involved in asking questions before, during, and after reading. Students practiced verbalization of questions during group story time activities.

Fluency was addressed daily throughout the intervention using a variety of techniques. It was practiced with explicit guidance and feedback from the teachers during daily reading lessons. Read-alouds and audio taped books were utilized to model oral reading fluency during story time. Familiar text was reread to refine fluency. Self-selected reading was also a time in which students practiced fluency by reading and enjoying text at independent reading levels. Word recognition activities, leading to fluency, were included in the daily practice of using high frequency words listed on a word wall. Direct phonics instruction was also employed. Kindergarten and first grade used cross-curricular theme

units to reinforce transfer of comprehension strategies taught and to increase the development of prior knowledge.

Posttests were the Major Points Interview for Readers and the Developmental Reading Assessment. The MPIR assessed children's use of schema strategies and questioning strategies to enhance interpretation of text. DRA tests were conducted to record and analyze observable reading behaviors. Both posttests were administered on an individual basis in mid-January to document growth during the intervention.

## Presentation and Analysis of Results

Postmeasures were given to assess the effects of the intervention to increase the comprehension skills of targeted kindergarten and first graders. All assessments were administered in September, 2001 and January, 2002. Materials remained the same for both assessments.

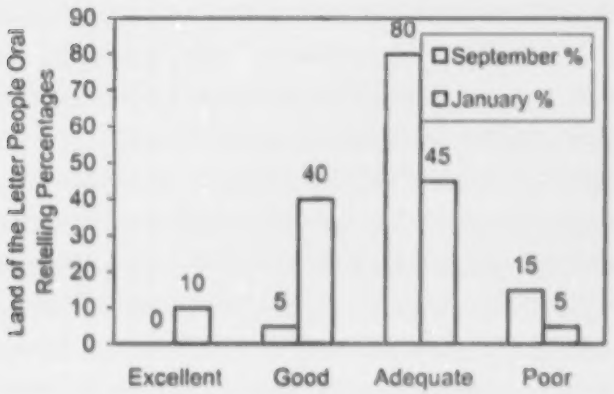


Figure 1. The percentages of children who scored excellent, good, adequate, or poor on the Land of the Letter People Comprehension Test in September, 2001 and January, 2002.


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Figure 1 shows the number of students who could retell the story without prompts (excellent), with little prompting (good), prompting with questions (adequate), and those who could not retell the story (poor). Purpose of the postmeasure was to identify students who had developed listening comprehension skills after strategies were introduced. Targeted kindergarten children showed an overall improvement in story comprehension. In January 2002, ten percent of the children did not need any prompting to retell the story read to them. Forty percent of the children needed little prompting to retell the story, which is a meaningful increase from five percent in September. Those needing extra prompting to tell the story (a score of 2) decreased from 80 percent to 45 percent.

Most of the students showed a gain in the use of listening comprehension strategies. Sixty percent of the students actually improved one or more levels on the rubric. Thirty-five percent of the students remained on the same level. Only five percent of the students had trouble communicating the details of the story. The most notable gain was in levels three or four where only five percent of the students scored in September 2001, and 50 percent scored in these levels in January 2002.

The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) was administered to the targeted first graders in September, 2001 and again in January, 2002. Results of the January assessment are shown in Table1.

Table 1

DRA Levels of First Grade Students in September 2001 and January, 2002

| Stage | Level | Sept. % | Jan.% |
|---|---|---|---|
| Emergent | A-2 (Kindergarten level) | 42 | 3 |
| Early | 3-6 (1st quarter 1st grade) | 44 | 40 |
| Early | 8-10 (2nd quarter 1st grade) | 0 | 10 |
| Transitional | 12-14 (3rd quarter 1st grade) | 7 | 13 |
| Transitional | 16-18 (4th quarter 1st grade) | 0 | 8 |
| Transitional | 20-24 (early to mid 2nd grade) | 5 | 15 |
| Extending | 28-34 (late 2nd early 3rd grade) | 2 | 10 |

Table 1 shows the reading levels of the targeted children in September, 2001 and January, 2002. DRA test was administered to 40 children in January, 2002. Most students who scored at the Emergent Level on the DRA progressed one to three levels, putting them in the Early Level. Children who scored in the Early Level in September were more unpredictable, gaining anywhere from four to nine levels. Those who were already at the Transitional or Extending Level progressed, but not at a meaningful rate.

All children progressed at least one level; half of the group progressed at least three levels, and six children progressed seven or more levels. Forty six percent of the children were at the transitional level or above, which indicated they were beginning to read to learn. In the 18 week intervention, 25 percent of the children progressed six months or more in their reading levels.

The DRA results made it apparent that children who were struggling to develop a sight word vocabulary progressed at a much slower pace than those

who found learning to read easy. Students who were emergent readers gained the least in comparison to the other students. Children who began in the early, to transitional levels progressed the most. Children who scored above the emergent level on the DRA test had better developed readiness skills and were thus able to progress in reading at a faster rate. DRA tested the targeted children's independent reading level. Those who had limited sight word vocabulary lacked fluency and used comprehension strategies poorly. Too much effort was spent on decoding words, thus making it impossible to use comprehension strategies.

The first grade students were administered the Major Points Interview for Readers (MPIR) in September, 2001 and January, 2002. Table 2 reflects the results received during January, 2002 compared to September, 2001. The MPIR tests children's listening comprehension, unlike the DRA which tests independent reading level.

Table 2

MPIR Scores for Schema Strategy (Connecting Prior Knowledge) September, 2001 and January, 2002

| | Percentages of Student Response Scores at each of 5 Levels | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Assessment Questions | no response | | background connections | | relates schema to text | | expands interpretation | | explains schema use | |
| | Sept. | Jan. | Sept. | Jan. | Sept. | Jan. | Sept. | Jan. | Sept. | Jan. |
| 1. (memories elicited) | 24 | 18 | 34 | 15 | 37 | 67 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2. (personal applications) | 56 | 41 | 29 | 33 | 15 | 23 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| 3. (new understandings) | 63 | 86 | 28 | 5 | 7 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 3 |

Table 2 reflects the responses of the targeted first graders on the MPIR given in mid-January, 2002. The previous test in September, 2001, indicated no students could explain how schema helped them interpret the story. Children were using little, to no schema connections when listening to a story. Children did not know how to apply background knowledge, nor did they have background knowledge to increase understanding of a story.

Time was spent modeling the use of schema during story time, guided reading, and whole group reading instruction. Children were taught three schematic connections and were asked to demonstrate understanding during shared and instructional reading times. MPIR results showed children improved the use of schema, especially in the area of relating schema to text. Sixty-seven percent of the children could use their background experiences to relate to the story showing a gain of 30 percent. Gains were also made in personal applications of schema, which means children used schema to understand the story, although these gains were not as meaningful. Few were able to verbalize what they learned from the story, possibly because topics were so familiar. The results indicated the targeted first graders increased their ability to use past experiences to understand the story, but were not able to expand their understanding of the story using schema.

The second reading strategy assessed by the MPIR was the use of questioning to enhance the meaning of the text. The questioning strategy was modeled and practiced during shared reading. Table 3 reflects the results of the MPIR administered in January, 2002 compared to September, 2001.

Table 3

MPIR Scores for Questioning Strategy, September, 2001 and January, 2002

| | Percentages of Student Response Scores at each of 5 Levels | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Assessment Questions | no questions | | poses literal questions | | questions clarify meaning | | questions enhance meaning | | questions challenge meaning | |
| | Sept. | Jan. | Sept. | Jan. | Sept. | Jan. | Sept. | Jan. | Sept | .Jan. |
| 1. (questions during listening) | 53 | 31 | 35 | 13 | 12 | 53 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| 2. (questions after listening) | 93 | 74 | 2 | 13 | 5 | 13 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 3. (new understandings) | 100 | 92 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Table 3 shows improvement in the use of questioning strategies. The use of questioning to interpret text was modeled. Children were able to use questioning to clarify meaning both during and after listening to the story. Gains were made from students asking no questions, to students asking literal questions, and finally, questioning to clarify meaning for all three assessment questions.

Students having no questions or posing literal questions while listening to a story showed a gain of 22 percent, respectively, from September, 2001 to January, 2002. Posttest scores for children having no questions after listening to a story indicated a gain of 19 percent. Additionally, students posing literal questions after listening to a story showed a gain of nine percent from September, 2001 to January, 2002.

Most notable improvement was children's progression from posing no questions to using questions to clarify meaning. Fifty-three percent of the children could use questions to clarify meaning compared to 12 percent in September.

## Discussion

After incorporating reading and listening comprehension strategies in the targeted classrooms and analyzing data collected from the 18 week intervention, researchers noted positive results. Varying degrees of improvement were evident in all children who participated in the intervention.

The teacher of the targeted kindergarten classroom observed improvement on comprehension scores from September to January. Children of the kindergarten class became more attentive during story time and academic activities. Listening activities were increased to encourage children to be more accountable for verbal directions. The teacher observed a positive effect with the use of modeling the questioning strategy during story time. Children became more comfortable asking questions and making predictions about stories read to them. The kindergarten teacher will continue to implement intervention strategies.

Resulting data showed all students in the targeted first grade classrooms improved with varying amounts of accomplishment. Children became more competent with schema strategy and prediction in stories read to them. Students began to develop the questioning strategy. They showed gains in understanding differences in strategies applied. Students seemed developmentally more prepared to understand and to use schema and prediction strategies compared

to use of questioning strategy. It was significantly more difficult for the children to use these comprehension strategies when reading independently compared to shared reading.

Although all first graders' comprehension levels improved, a significant difference in degree of improvement was noticed between children who entered first grade with readiness skills compared to children who lacked readiness skills. Teachers of three targeted classrooms felt time and maturation may have accounted for some of the increases of scores. As the semester progressed, many children could not apply all the strategies because word recognition was so limited. Lack of fluency negatively affected independent reading comprehension skills.

The action plan included transferring the use of comprehension strategies from shared reading to independent reading. Researchers found this goal to be unrealistic for this particular group of first graders. The children were focused on increasing reading vocabulary and fluency, making it very difficult to focus additionally on either one of the comprehension strategies. Any improvement in the use of comprehension strategies during independent reading was documented through teacher observation. Researchers found that a strategy could not be successfully applied if a child was not developmentally ready.

The researchers also felt a number of variables made analyzing the data more difficult. Choices of assessments for young or beginning readers were limited due to lack of reading skills of young children. For that reason, the Gates-MacGinite Test was eliminated from the action plan because the children

entering first grade not reading were unable to take the test. The Major Points Interview for Readers was a listening comprehension assessment and did not test reading comprehension. The size of the school limited the use of a control group, thus making it difficult to interpret resulting data.

Activities and strategies of this 18-week intervention were planned and implemented based on authentic research findings. Reading lessons included balanced literacy instruction known to work well with young children. Teachers of the targeted classrooms will continue to use the identified interventions. The researchers recommend modeling and instruction of reading comprehension strategies along with a balanced literacy curriculum, continue into the next grade levels. The researchers recommend teachers receive training in comprehension instruction strategies to promote positive outcomes of the action research.

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# APPENDIX

## Comprehension Survey

1. Do you think students are exhibiting poor comprehension skills?

2. If so, how can you support your opinion that the children are exhibiting poor comprehension skills?

3. Do you see a difference in word-reading skills and comprehension skills when students enter 2nd or 3rd grade?

4. How do you feel about the following issues: 3-very significant, 2-significant, 1-not significant

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| A. Lack of time for mastery of reading skills due to overcrowded curriculum | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| B. Older basal usage | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| C. Lack of continuing education in teaching reading strategies | 3 | 2 | 1 |

5. Have current reading research findings in professional journals been available to you? Yes No

6. Would you take advantage of professional journals? Yes No

7. Do you make time for self-selected reading? Yes No
   If so, how much do you incorporate in your daily schedule?

8. Do you think our Language Arts (writing, strategy instruction, phonics, and self-selected reading) curriculum is balanced? Yes No

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